

# NOTES ON LOW-INTENSITY WARFARE

by

EDWARD N. LUTTWAK

*Ex clades, victoria?* That old commonplace—From defeat, victory—has it that from the deepest abyss of defeat as from the culminating point of victory, nations start on intersecting paths: the complacent winners to defeat, and the losers who have learned the lessons taught in blood and humiliation, to victory. Actually, history scarcely upholds the commonplace. The defeated may not survive to learn, and of course empires are made by those among the victorious who do not become complacent. Now it seems that this country, already unique in so many other ways, may offer a new precedent to history and a new refutation of the commonplace: the complacent defeated certainly cannot aspire to victory. Three allies and much of our international authority were lost in the Vietnam War as well as much blood and treasure, and yet delusions of adequacy persist. Because of the characteristic ambiguities of that war, the nation, though roundly defeated, has nevertheless been denied the customary benefit of military defeat. Little was therefore learned in the experience, except for two false lessons.

First, the nation acquired its phobia of involvement in the most prevalent form of conflict, and the one form of conflict unlikely to lead to nuclear escalation. The toll that irrational fear has exacted from interests large and small thereby left undefended has continued to grow, since the days of the Angola crisis.

Likewise, it appears that some members of the military profession have come to

believe that the armed forces of the United States should not be ordered into war without a prior guarantee of irrevocable public support. They insist on a letter of credit of the sort that is demanded before shipping merchandise to dubious importers from lawless countries. The implicit belief is, of course, that there was no causal link between the *manner* in which the Vietnam War was fought and the increasing aversion of the decently patriotic among the public.

In an alternative formulation, the demand is that the armed forces should only be sent to war if "vital" national interests are at stake. In that case, it may be calculated, public support should endure, no matter how badly the war is fought. Entirely normal and appropriate in the case of Switzerland or San Marino, which have issued no promises to fight in defense of any foreign country, that is of course a bizarre and impossible demand for the United States. Such tranquillity as the world enjoys is in significant degree assured by the defense guarantees which the United States has issued by treaty or otherwise to almost 50 countries around the world. In each case, to honor the promissory note the United States must stand ready to resist aggression even though the interests thereby affirmed can scarcely be deemed "vital," except in the rarest cases. A protective quasi-global empire cannot merely fight when "vital" interests are at stake. That is the privilege of the less ambitious, and in our days neither Britain nor France have claimed exemption. (In 1968 the British Army celebrated its one year of the entire century so far in which no British

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soldier died in combat.) If, on the other hand, the notion of an imperial obligation to fight for less-than-vital interests is rejected, then in logic one can no longer claim an imperial-sized budget for the armed services, whose quasi-global scope must then be a mere facade, dangerously deceptive to all concerned.

Actually, of course, the lesson in point is quite another: it is an integral part of the duties of the armed forces to sustain public support by a purposeful and decently economical conduct of war operations. Luxuriant bureaucratic excess manifest in lavishly staffed headquarters and absurdly over-elaborate services and—more important—the futile misuse of firepower in huge quantities will, in due course, undermine public support for war even if very important national interests are at risk. Conversely, the elegantly austere conduct of military operations will gain public support even if only minor interests are at stake. Journalists who went to North Borneo to decry anachronism and suspect motives were instead captivated by the romance of elite troops at home in the jungle: after being briefed in rudimentary field headquarters manned by a handful of officers content to sleep in native huts, after going up river in a motorized canoe with three quiet riflemen and a Dayak tracker, even hostile journalists could only write well of them, of the British Army in general, and of the campaign. By contrast, journalists who went to Vietnam favorably disposed (there were a few) could only be antagonized by the experience. They were first confronted by hordes of visibly underemployed officers reduced to clerical duties in sprawling headquarters, and then by scenes of gross tactical excess, the heavy-weight fighter-bombers converging to bomb a few flimsy huts, the air cavalry helicopters sweeping a patch of tall grass with a million dollars' worth of ammunition. Some observers could recognize tactical poverty in the very abundance with which the ordnance was used; others could detect the lack of any one clear-cut strategy in the generosity with which each service and branch was granted a role in the war; others still were simply disgusted by

the wasteful disproportion between efforts and results.

Public support cannot be demanded up front; it must be earned.

Certainly the large military lessons that Vietnam might have taught have remained unlearned. Notably, the multiservice command system whose apex is formed by the JCS organization and whose sublime Vietnam expression was that great bureaucratic labyrinth known as USMACV, stands totally unreformed.

Still today it ruthlessly subordinates the sharp choices which strategy unfailingly requires to the convenience of bureaucratic harmony between the services and their branches. The "unified" style of military planning and operational control is well suited for a landing and front-opening campaign on the scale of Normandy in June 1944. As soon as the scale is reduced, it results in a grotesque over-elaboration that rapidly becomes dysfunctional.

The other unlearned lesson brings us to our subject: the defense establishment as a whole still operates under the implicit assumption that "low-intensity" warfare is merely a lesser-included case of "real" war. Such "real" war is, of course, an idealized depiction, not based on empirical evidence. Unlike the wars now taking place in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru if not elsewhere in Latin America; in Eritrea, Namibia, and indeed all around South Africa and in the ex-Spanish Sahara, too, in Africa; in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Lebanon, and the Philippines in Asia, the notion of "real" war is not corrupted by the

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Dr. Edward N. Luttwak is a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, and a consultant to the Defense and State Departments on international affairs and national security policy. He is a graduate of the London School of Economics and earned his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Luttwak is the author of a number of books and articles on strategic and military affairs, including *The Grand Strategy of the Soviet Union* (1983).



intrusions of complex and greatly varied realities.

Instead, that "real" war for which our weapons are designed, our forces structured, and our officers career-developed (by rapid rotation in any little wars that might be available) lives intact and irrefutable in the pages of our doctrinal manuals, there resting undisturbed because no "real" war has been fought during these last 30 years—and of course one hopes that none will be fought during the next 30 years either. But still the high-intensity, "real" war is obviously the very best of all possible wars for such technically accomplished armed forces as our own, so amply supplied with highly qualified, much-decorated, and well-educated officers whose sophistication would clearly be wasted in the sordid little wars that actually are.

For all its virtues, however, "real war" may not in fact embrace all the equipment requirements, all the operational methods and tactics, and all the organizational formats required for the effective conduct of low-intensity warfare. The latter can be a lesser-included case, but only for armed forces of a particular kind, and not our own.

#### **ATTRITION, MANEUVER, AND LOW-INTENSITY WARFARE**

All armed forces combine elements of attrition on the one hand and relational-maneuver on the other in their overall approach to war; their position in the attrition/maneuver spectrum is manifest in their operational methods, tactics, and organizational arrangements, but especially in their methods of officer education.

The closer they are to the theoretical extreme of pure attrition, the more armed forces tend to be focused on their own internal administration and operations, being correspondingly less responsive to the external environment comprising the enemy, the terrain, and the specific phenomena of any one particular conflict. That of course is the correct orientation for armed forces close to the attrition end of the spectrum. Because victory is to be obtained by administering superior material resources, by their transformation into firepower, and by the application

of the latter upon the enemy, armed forces of that kind should concentrate on their own inner workings to maximize process efficiencies all around.

The terrain counts only insofar as it presents obstacles to transportation, deployment, and the efficient application of firepower. As for the enemy, it is merely a set of targets which must be designated, located, and sometimes induced to concentrate. Accordingly, a well-managed armed force of this kind cannot logically be adaptive to the external environment; instead it should strive to develop an optimal set of organizational formats, methods, and tactics which are then to be applied whenever possible with the least modification, because any modification must be suboptimal.

By contrast, the closer they are to the relational-maneuver end of the spectrum, the more armed forces will tend to be outer-regarding. That too is the correct orientation for that kind of armed force. In relational maneuver, victory is to be obtained by identifying the specific weaknesses of the particular enemy and then reconfiguring one's own capabilities to exploit those weaknesses. Therefore the keys to success are first the ability to interpret the external environment in all its aspects, subtle as well as obvious, and then to adapt one's own organizational formats, operational methods, and tactics to suit the requirements of the particular situation.

Accordingly, armed forces with a high relational-maneuver content cannot usually maximize process efficiencies and cannot logically develop optimal organizational formats, methods, and tactics. Instead each must be relational, i.e. reconfigured ad hoc for the theater, the enemy, and the situation. There is, of course, no inherent virtue to either attrition or relational maneuver. Armed forces develop historically to their position on the spectrum, which changes over time, to reflect, *inter alia*, changes in the perceived balance of military power. The defect of attrition, i.e. its high cost, is balanced by the high risk which is the defect of relational maneuver. In general, it is appropriate for the rich to opt for attrition while the poor who acquire large military

ambitions had better also acquire a taste for relational-maneuver, which offers high payoffs of low material cost in exchange for corresponding risks. The trouble begins, and the equality between the two approaches to war ends, precisely in the case of low-intensity warfare. Then we find that between armed forces of equal competence, the closer they stand to the relational-maneuver end of the spectrum, the greater will be their effectiveness.

That result follows inexorably by definition: in the degree that intensity declines, the relevance of attrition must decline also, simply because the targets become less and less defined, and more and more dispersed. Yet more important, the dominant phenomena of war become more and more insubstantial and untargetable: not even the most accurate of our precision-guided munitions can be aimed at an atmosphere of terror or at a climate of subversion. The obdurate pursuit of attrition efficiencies in a low-intensity conflict can only be futile. And the greater the volume of the "throughputs" that are processed to generate firepower, the more the results are likely to be counterproductive by antagonizing the local population, which must suffer collateral damage, by demoralizing the armed forces themselves, whose members must be aware of the futility, and by arousing opposition within the nation at home, for even the firmly patriotic cannot but react adversely to a great and costly disproportion between vast efforts and dubious results.

Without attempting to cite an exhaustive record, it is by contrast interesting to note the success of the prototypical relational-maneuver armies when they tried their hand at low-intensity operations. Now that the mists of wartime propaganda, and of the patriotic self-delusion of the occupied nations, have both been dissipated by serious historical research, the success of German counterguerrilla operations in Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia, and France has been duly recognized. As usual with the German Army, relational organizational formats and tailor-made operational methods played a large role in these successes. Similarly, the total absence

of a documentary record should not cause us to overlook the outstanding success of the Israeli Army in virtually extinguishing both guerrilla and terrorist activities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Again, novel operational methods tailored specifically to local peculiarities played a large role in the outcome, as did a great variety of specially designed relational equipment.

### HOW NOT TO DO IT

In theory, armed forces endowed with competent leaders should adapt to diverse circumstances regardless of their original orientation. But in practice, as noted, the greater their attrition content, the more will armed forces tend to be inner-regarding, eventually reaching a point where they scarcely extend diplomatic recognition to the actual phenomena of any one particular conflict, especially if those phenomena are complex, ill-defined, and ambiguous—as is usually the case in low-intensity conflicts. When, in addition, the armed forces also happen to have an exceedingly complex internal structure greatly over-officered, pervasively over-administered, and minutely regulated by inter-bureaucratic compacts between services and branches, all the rigidities that ensue will further inhibit adaptation. For one thing, the internal coordination of the diverse forces (and the accompanying office politics) will absorb much of the energy of staffs and commanders. Beyond that there is an even greater obstacle: in the nature of things, any sharply cut adaptive response is likely to attack the delicate fabric of bureaucratic harmony.

It was only logical, therefore, that in Vietnam USMACV should have developed into an impressively large headquarters devoted to the "equitable sharing" of the war among the services and their branches. No organization so complex on the inside could possibly be responsive to the quite varied and often exotic phenomena on the outside. Instead, under its loose and most generous administration, each element was allowed to perform in its own preferred style, often to produce firepower in huge amounts in spite

of the great scarcity of conveniently targetable enemies.

Because the system has not been reformed to produce our own version of a non-service, non-branch General Staff, we can expect no better result in the future. Let the United States go to war, virtually any war, and we would again see the Air Force's Tactical Air Command bombing away, and the Strategic Air Command too, most probably; if there is a coastline anywhere near, the Navy will claim two shares, one for its own tactical air and another for the big guns of its gloriously reactivated battleships; none would dare to deny the Marine Corps its own slice of the territory, to be entered over the beach if physically possible, even if ports happen to be most convenient.

Nor can the Army be expected to harm its own internal conviviality by failing to provide fair shares for all, armor even in the jungle, artillery even if the enemy hardly gathers, and so on. After all, a "unified" command and bureaucratized services can only reproduce their own image, and if the enemy refuses to cooperate by playing his assigned role in everyone's conception of a "real" war, the discourtesy will simply be ignored.

Just recently, for example, it was decided to have an exercise in Central America. Aside from both the Second and Third Fleets, legitimately present, room was found to employ both the Seabees and the Army Engineers for a minor bit of well-drilling and such; both the Marines and the Coast Guard were deemed essential to train a few Hondurans in the handling of a few small boats; of course the Marines figured again as a force which must arrive on the scene by amphibious landing; and finally, to train another few Hondurans in counter guerrilla operations, it was deemed essential to employ the Army's Special Forces and the Navy SEALs and a Special Operations detachment of the Air Force.

Undoubtedly the Hondurans should be grateful for such a varied generosity; one need only think of all the pleasant hours that their officers and men will pass in future years as they compare and contrast all those

different procedures, diverse jargons, and contrasting doctrines that they saw applied to the same few tasks. There can be no greater affirmation of our national commitment to pluralism.

The "unified" method of military action yields for us all the economies typical of multinational alliances and also their typical degree of strategic coherence—without, however, supplying foreigners to do some of the dying. But the "unified" style does have a surpassing bureaucratic virtue: it can justify large overheads for small operations. With a sufficient degree of organizational fragmentation, the labor of coordination can become wonderfully complicated even if only minute forces are involved. Thus notoriously overstuffed headquarters are allowed, if only briefly, to experience the joys of full employment.<sup>1</sup>

#### FIGHT SEPARATE AND WIN

In theory, competent military leaders should be able to adjust the practice of their armed forces to achieve an optimal position on the attrition/relational-maneuver spectrum, according to the relevant military force balances and the situation at hand. In practice, however, it is history (as fossilized by tradition) and also the collective self-image of the armed forces and the nation itself that determine the composition of the attrition/relational-maneuver mix. If, therefore, armed forces with a high attrition content must engage in low-intensity warfare, the best option is to create a separate force for the purpose.

Because the influences to be overcome are so pervasive, the more the dedicated low-intensity force is separate in every way from the rest of the armed forces, the greater its chances of success. In practice, when the attrition content of the armed forces is extremely high, it is not merely specialized units that are needed but rather a separate branch so autonomous that it begins to resemble a separate service. It certainly needs its own officer corps trained for the task *ab initio* and placed in a separate career track.

Every instinct of bureaucratic efficiency is against that solution. But for armed forces inherently ill-suited for the conduct of low-intensity operations, but which may be highly effective in other roles, the separatist solution is the only alternative to failure, or else severe deformations.

Certainly the attempt to change over to a relational-maneuver style merely to engage in low-intensity war must be disruptive and potentially dangerous. One can easily contemplate the consequences that would have ensued if the United States had in fact won the Vietnam War in relational style, by converting its Army into an Asian constabulary.

On the other hand, it is simply unprofessional to try to fight a low-intensity war with forces structured and built for the opposite requirement. Consider four profound differences:

- Armed forces with a high attrition content are supposed to optimize standard operating procedures for worldwide application, because for them all wars are the same. Low-intensity wars, however, are all different, and each requires an ad hoc set of standard operating procedures. It follows that a primary task for the officers of the dedicated body is to develop one-place, one-time adaptive doctrines and methods.

- Armed forces with a high attrition content must treat all their personnel as interchangeable parts to maintain their efficiency. Low-intensity wars, on the other hand, usually require the persistent application of one-place, one-time expertise, embodied in specific individuals with unique attributes. Thus the normal practices of rotation cannot apply.

- Armed forces with a high attrition content operate within an arena of military action demarcated by externally-set political guides. Low-intensity wars, however, are made of political phenomena with a martial aspect. It follows that the senior officers of the dedicated body should have the particular aptitudes needed for the successful manipulation of the political variables. In low-intensity wars victory is normally obtained by altering

the political variables to the point where the enemy becomes ineffectual, and not by actually defeating enemies in battle.

- Armed forces with a high attrition content must accord a dominant priority to logistics first of all, and then to the deployment, upkeep, and utilization of the best-available means of firepower. Low-intensity wars cannot, by definition, be won by the efficient application of firepower. It follows that the officers of the dedicated body do not need the skills and aptitudes required for the management of large-scale organizations and the efficient operation of advanced equipment. On the other hand, they do need the ability to insert themselves into a foreign cultural milieu and to train and then lead local forces or native auxiliaries, who will almost always be equipped only with the simplest weapons.

The sublime irony is, of course, that the United States already has such a dedicated body, although not sufficiently autonomous to offer a separate career track. By nature "relational," by nature adaptive, the Special Forces should be exactly what we need. Their very existence is an implied recognition that low-intensity war is not a lesser-included case; this contradicts the dominant orientation. Hence the existence of the Special Forces has always been precarious.

At present, the Special Forces are very weak bureaucratically because they are merely marginal when they should instead be autonomous and yet also accepted as an important part of the Army. From this all the other evils derive, including the Special Forces' difficulties in attracting the more ambitious among the officer cadre, and the observed propensity of the "unified" commands and the JCS to push Special Forces aside as soon as a conflict begins to look role-enhancing to the bigger boys. One possible solution is to solve the problem by an act of political intervention—more sustained and effective than President Kennedy's initiative. Another and far superior solution is to create a broader framework in which Special Forces would naturally fit and from which it could draw support: a light infantry

branch whose several divisions—much needed in any case—would have a pronounced relational-maneuver orientation and which would be outer-regarding by nature.

One consequence of the Special Forces' bureaucratic weakness, seemingly quite petty but in fact revealing and by no means unimportant, is vividly manifest in El Salvador. It is a typical assumption of inner-regarding armed forces that their particular equipment preferences have universal validity. As a result, it is assumed that by appropriate selection from the standard inventory any particular war requirement can be met.

More remarkably still, it is implicitly believed that the equipment developed to suit the needs and possibilities of the richest armed forces of the world will also fit the needs of the motley forces which are invariably our allies in low-intensity wars. For example, the US Army and Marine Corps both happen to favor the lightest, cheapest, and least capable of the automatic rifles on the world market. That is an understandable preference for armed forces which actually plan to fight their "real" wars by artillery and airpower. Under the inner-regarding practice it is assumed as a matter of course that the same rifle will also be suitable for the army of El Salvador, for whom rifles and machine guns provide virtually all the available firepower. Our late allies in Indochina were given M-16s, and now the troops of El Salvador receive the same flimsy and unsoldierly rifle, with the same millimetric tolerances that require standards of cleanliness unknown to peasants. Acres of computer printouts may prove the excellence of the weapon, but one should not expect high self-confidence from soldiers who are sent into action carrying a weapon that feels like a large toothbrush. But then, of course, there is no mathematical designation for "feel," and no system preoccupied with "real" war can be expected to pay attention to such petty things as mere rifles.

Certainly if the Special Forces had anywhere near the appropriate degree of autonomy, they would long ago have ensured the production of a sturdy steel and wood

"military assistance" automatic rifle—a US AK-47, similar to the Israeli AK-47 which has been embellished into the Galil. These would, of course, be demonstrably inferior to the M-16 by any respectable operational research (the Galil is downright absurd because of its weight), but you could bet your paycheck against an old copy of FM 100-5 that every self-respecting soldier in the Army would seek to have the sturdier, better-feeling weapon.

Another obvious requirement vividly manifest in El Salvador is the production of a "military assistance" machine-gun more forgiving of human frailties than the M-60. That, too, is a perfectly good weapon, of course, but rudimentary armies are better off with a magazine-fed light machine-gun that is more difficult to jam.

Far more important is the strategic autonomy that would result from institutional autonomy. Low-intensity wars should belong to the Special Forces unambiguously and fully, with other service components coming in as needed under Special Forces direction, to be the servants and not the masters.

In the terms of the art, low-intensity wars would come under "specified" commands set up for the purpose and headed by Special Forces officers. Then, one hopes, we would no longer see even the smallest military assistance groups shared out between the different services and we would no longer see the constant renewal of inexperience by the senseless enforcement of the principle of rotation even in cases where unique expertise vital for continuity is thereby dissipated.

It was not because of any deep-seated cultural defect in the nation as a whole, nor because of a lack of dedication, talent, or expertise in the armed forces that the Vietnam War was lost in the sequence of gross excess, public opposition, imposed withdrawal, and final abandonment. It was rather the uniquely inappropriate organizational structure of multi-service armed forces structurally dedicated to the conduct of "real" war in the attrition style that condemned so many good men to perform so very badly. It is imperative now to achieve the drastic



organizational remedy that will liberate the abilities and patriotic devotion so amply present among officers and men, to obtain their fruits for the nation.

#### NOTE

1. The headquarters and service units sent into Honduras in conjunction with the exercise attained impressive dimensions: 1500 were assigned to support 3500 (*The Washington Post*, 24 August, p. A22). That is the sort of ratio that inspires the ill-concealed ridicule of the militarily competent among our allies.

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